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ABSTRACT

Recommendations to increase the relevance of information, improve the communication of information, and increase user responsiveness to information are presented. Recommendations include the following: (1) the Department of Education (ED) should institute a flexible planning system for evaluations of federal education programs; (2) congressional requests for evaluation should identify the kind of question(s) to be addressed; (3) in evaluation initiated by the ED, the kinds of evaluation activities to be carried out should be specified clearly and should be justified in terms of program development or program implementation; (4) the ED should ensure that dissemination of evaluation results achieves adequate coverage; (5) the ED should observe the rights of any parties at interest and the public in general to information generated about public programs; (6) the ED should test various mechanisms for providing linkage between evaluators and potential users; and (7) the ED should provide funds for training programs in evaluation to increase the skills of individuals currently charged with carrying out or using evaluations and to increase the participation of minorities. While no formal recommendation was made to increase user responsiveness to evaluation, it was suggested that the ED consider a plan requiring evaluation use reports. (RL)

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING EVALUATION UTILIZATION IN FEDERAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

(From the Report of the National Research Council Committee on Program Evaluation in Education)

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A frequently voiced criticism is that evaluation findings are seldom used. Implicit in this criticism is the notion that utilization means direct and often immediate changes in policy and program. In fact, there are several different types of utilization, not all immediately apparent. Moreover, the systematic communication of findings does not automatically lead to utilization, nor does utilization always imply change.

Evaluation findings may, indeed, be used for making specific decisions at a given time, but they may also enter into decisions where other factors lobby for greater influence. Evaluation sponsors may not have intended to use the evaluation report for specific and immediate changes. Even when no immediate use of knowledge clearly derives from evaluations, the effect of that knowledge cumulates over time and is slowly absorbed, eventually leading to changes in concepts and decision perspectives. On the other hand, evaluation information may be considered and discarded because it is inappropriate or its suggestions for policy infeasible.

The Committee on Program Evaluation in Education has considered how to increase evaluation use in federal education programs. Its recommendations are easily categorized into three groupings: (1) increasing the relevance of

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information; (2) improving the communication of information; and, (3) increasing user responsiveness to information. These categories are not unique to the work of the Committee, but rather draw heavily upon the research literature on knowledge and evaluation utilization (see, for example, Davis and Salasin 1975, Glaser 1973, Havelock 1976, Caplan 1977, Patton 1978, Alkin et al. 1979). For each category, the recommendations from the utilization chapter of the report will be presented, followed by applicable recommendations from other report sections.

INCREASING THE RELEVANCE OF INFORMATION

For evaluation information to be used it must be perceived as "relevant" by the primary user audience. Achieving such a state of perceived relevance, however, is not easy: relevance demands continuous interaction between the primary audience and the researcher. Evaluator and audience must negotiate content, deciding together what the evaluation can and should address and how to report data. The evaluator cannot assume that content won't need renegotiation several times. When the evaluator understands the audience's aims, they must devise an appropriate research form together. The evaluation report must offer realistic options which pay attention to various constraints on the user audience. Finally, the evaluation information must be timely, addressing current issues and observing immediate schedules.

Utilization Chapter Recommendations

Recommendation D-10. The Department of Education should institute a flexible planning system for evaluations of federal education programs.

A flexible planning system maximizes the likelihood that evaluation information will yield relevant information in a timely manner. The Committee believes that an evaluation plan for a major education program

should contain a series of linked studies: some which furnish factual information in reasonably short time, and some which address issues requiring longer study. Thus, information will be available for recurring legislative decision cycles on education programs, while other ongoing evaluation studies address long-range problems. (e.g., interesting but unanticipated questions that arise as a result of ongoing research, changes in policy, or development of new programs).

Other Recommendations

Recommendation C-1. Congressional requests for evaluation should identify the kind of question(s) to be addressed.

The Committee believes that evaluators can provide more relevant information if the Congress makes more explicit the nature of its information needs (e.g., program services, program coverage, program impact). When Congress does not specify questions and audiences ahead of time, the evaluators' systematic engagement in continuing dialogue with members of Congress and congressional staff can clarify congressional intent.

Recommendation D-1. In evaluations initiated by the Department of Education, the kinds of evaluation activities to be carried out should be specified clearly and should be justified in terms of program development or program implementation.

This recommendation, analogous to recommendation C-1 made to the Congress, emphasizes specifying the evaluation activities appropriate to a program's given stage of planning or implementation. Department officials need to establish what they wish to know about a program, within what time periods, and the potential for the evaluation information.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION OF INFORMATION

Before evaluation can be used it must be communicated. And the conscious, systematic efforts of evaluators can improve communication.

Therefore, evaluators must establish clearly that attention to deliberate communication is not a pro forma exercise. The literature identifies many factors for enhanced communication and evaluation use which can be grouped under three headings: coverage, communicability, and linkage.

Communication coverage is attained if relevant evaluation information is delivered to primary audiences, and available and distributed to appropriate secondary audiences.

Communicability is best attained by matching the evaluators communication style to that of the primary audiences(s). Several factors contributing to communicablity have emerged from the literature and successful practice: (1) reports which are understandable and situationally applicable; (2) emphasis on the positive action steps; (3) personal presentation by a credible evaluator.

Providing the necessary linkage between evaluation findings and action is a problem of great concern. Research on linkage has focused on a number of factors: (1) responsiveness to differences between researchers and audience; (2) mediating problem definitions between researchability and audience relevance; (3) human agents who facilitate or perform the requisite face-to-face communication; (4) open systems which encourage people to be more aware and accepting of evaluation information that may come from the outside.[1] Evaluators can perform linkage functions themselves, but occasionally need external "transfer agents." The recommendation as stated is attentive to the primary orientation of most people who evaluate national programs; They are, at best, able - but not user oriented - researchers. Linkage agents is one solution to the current deficiencies; a second is to train user oriented evaluators capable of serving both the traditional

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[1]On a personal note, I add that I see the knowledge transfer agent as redundant if evaluation is properly done and evaluators are themselves more user oriented (see Alkin et al, 1979; Patton, 1978). Indeed, the inclusion of this discussion predefines evaluators as pure researchers oblivious to policy settings (but knowledgeable as statisticians, research designers, etc.)

evaluation research function and the user linkages.[2]

Utilization Chapter Recommendations

Recommendation D-13. The Department of Education should ensure that dissemination of evaluation results achieves adequate coverage.

At the very least, evaluation results must be communicated (delivered) to the primary audiences(s). This requirement would seem self-evident, but it often is not met. Beyond that, evaluation results should be reported to a variety of secondary audiences. In the case of written final reports this would certainly require the availablity and distribution to these interested groups. To insure attention to attaining adequate coverage, the Committee believes that all evaluation ~~purposes~~ proposals should include a dissemination plan oriented towards maximizing the likelihood of use. This plan should include: primary and secondary audience specification, information needs of each, dissemination strategies to be employed, timetables, etc.

Recommendation D-14. The Department of Education should observe the rights of any parties at interest and the public in general to information generated about public programs.

Though minimal dissemination is concerned primarily with the immediate or primary audience, other people are significantly affected by the programs being evaluated; for example, those who manage them, those who provide program services, and those who are intended to benefit (or their representatives). Since evaluations are paid for with public funds, they should also be made available to the public at large. Steps needed to provide improved public access to evaluation findings include: (1) limiting the

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[2]A further note is in order: attention to external linkage agents focuses on what to do to facilitate the use of a completed evaluation; the primary linkages are established prior to the evaluation study's conduct and are best made by the evaluator. (A primary issue here is evaluator credibility.)

period during which the sponsoring agency or managers and executives to exclusive access to evaluation findings; (2) maintaining the privacy rights of individuals and organizations; and (3) appending interpretations and critiques issuing from a review to evaluations on public release.

Recommendation D-9. The Department of Education should test various mechanisms for providing linkage between evaluators and potential users.

The Committee recommended that the Department consider establishing a unit charged with studying, developing, and instituting knowledge transfer mechanisms and evaluating their effectiveness. Alternatively, outside experts might be charged with this responsibility. Appropriate activities would include: Translating evaluation reports so that they can be understood by the intended audiences (see footnote #1 on page 4); funding research (in conjunction with the NIE dissemination research unit) on the communication and use of evaluation information and developing procedures designed to improve the day-to-day use of evaluation data, at least within the department.

Other Recommendations

Recommendation D-4. The Department of Education should provide funds for training programs in evaluation to increase the skills of individuals currently charged with carrying out or using evaluations and to increase the participation of minorities.

The communications gap between evaluators and administrators can be narrowed substantially without the aid of external linkage agents by appropriate training for evaluators. Evaluators need exposure to the problems, procedures, and constraints of federal education programs. They also need to improve interpersonal and communications skills in order to convey evaluation information effectively. Finally, evaluators need to be

convinced during their training of the importance of having an orientation to user needs.

INCREASING USER RESPONSIVENESS TO EVALUATION

Recently Sechrest (1980) has suggested that, if high-level administrators could be trained in how evaluations are done and how researchers present results, utilization would be increased. We have some doubts whether training alone is a sufficient strategy for increasing user responsiveness to evaluation. Nevertheless, if federal executives developed greater facility for the language of evaluation, they would certainly become more sophisticated readers of evaluation reports. Recommendation D-4 (discussed above) focusing on the communication gap between evaluators and users, does, in fact, suggest that evaluation training sessions for executives and program staff might sensitize them to the nature of evaluation information and its uses. The Committee suggests that short training sequences on such topics be developed and made routinely available to new staff.

Other Comments

User responsiveness to evaluation is further heightened by developing incentives for program managers to consider such information. If it is important to do evaluations, then it is equally important to encourage their use and consideration. This does not imply that recommendations in evaluation reports must be followed, but that evaluating at least be "listened to" and weighed in the decision making process.

While no formal recommendation was made, the Committee nevertheless suggested that the Department consider a plan for requiring evaluation use reports. Within a year after receiving an evaluation report, federal

program managers would return an evaluation use report. This report would include, for example, how they had - or had not - used the evaluation report, how much, and why/why not. The manager might analyze the factors which impeded or encouraged use and the other data sources which influenced decisions.

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